

Audience Ideas on 'Educating for the Unknown'

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The Source

In June, 2007, the *13th International Conference on Thinking* was held for a four-day period in Norrköping, Sweden. On the morning of the last day, with the conference closing at noon, I contributed to a plenary session foregrounding the theme "educating for the unknown." The theme contrasted with education's tendency to focus on conventional content, content often relatively unchanged for decades.

A break was planned immediately after the session. For a reflective activity, I invited participants to jot down on Post-its what they thought would be important kinds of knowledge and understanding to include in an education more oriented toward today's and tomorrow's complex world, an education for the unknown. Basic literacy and numeracy were acknowledged as important and people were not expected to mention those. Audience members put up their Post-its on a wall outside the conference room, trying to place them close to others that intuitively seemed similar.

The conference staff was good enough to type up the Post-its. I ended up classifying 332 responses. As I went through them, I tried to form categories that seem to represent repeated themes in a natural way. After conducting an initial classification, I went over all the responses again and shifted some items to categories that seem to fit better. Inevitably the classification of certain items was very much of a judgment call. In addition, some items seemed "singletons," hard to place in a larger category. For some items, I was not sure of the intended meaning.

The Results

Here is a quick profile of the results by principal categories in decreasing order of frequency.

Thinking. With 44 mentions, thinking in various forms was the most frequent mention. However, this should not be weighed much since after all the conference was about thinking; naturally thinking would be on people's minds as an important educational agenda.



Self-understanding. With 36 mentions, self-understanding, self-management, and self-development were themes within the next most frequent category.

Empathy. The 29 mentions related to empathy in a broad sense included themes such as understanding other individuals, races, cultures, and emotional intelligence.

Ethics. Also with 29 mentions, ethics (values, morals, etc.) was an important category.

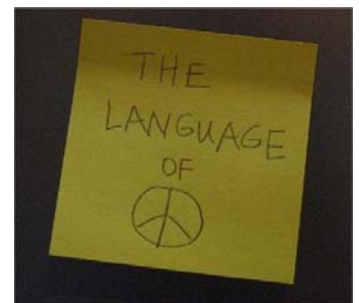
Communication. With 22 mentions, communication was prominent, including communication skills, languages, and nonverbal communication.



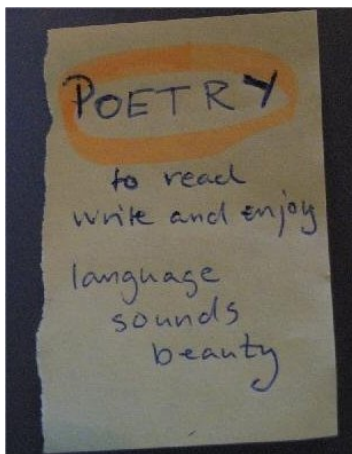
Learning. At 21 mentions, learning was also prominent, emphasizing learning skills, inquiry-oriented kinds of learning, the importance of unlearning, and the like. Of course, any of the other categories would involve learning also, but here respondents commented specifically on learning process and structures.

Environment. Environment earned 18 mentions, with themes such as world ecology, sustainability, and understanding environments and nature.

Global perspectives. At 15 mentions, global perspectives were important -- global responsibility, problems of poverty around the world, and understanding other cultures and races.



The Arts. Also at 15, the arts category included the visual arts, literature, and other forms of art. The arts were by far the most prominent example of something that might be considered a conventional subject matter or cluster of subject matters.



Collaboration. At 13, collaboration was deemed a significant area of skill and understanding for today's world.

Health. At 11, health and understanding one's body earned attention.

Several further categories appeared with nine or fewer mentions. Understanding *society*, managing *conflict*, and *spirituality* including meditation were among the more frequent. *Science* scored only six mentions, *mathematics* only two, and *technology* only two.

Reflections on the Future of Curriculum

There are many potential sources of bias in this sample. As already noted, the conference focused on thinking and probably attracted relatively progressive educators and members of other professions in trend. The framing of the question discouraged people from men-

tioning basic literacies, which certainly are tremendously important. Also, the framing of the question probably encouraged people to think outside of conventional curricular categories.

All that acknowledged, it is striking how unlike any kind of conventional curriculum the principal categories appear. Perhaps this is not so much a rejection of typical disciplines - science, math, history, and so on -- as a declaration that there are a number of tremendously important areas that receive relatively little attention within typical disciplines.

It is interesting to ask what conventional disciplines best represent the sorts of things people mentioned most often. Those disciplines would probably be Civics/Social studies (including ethics), Ecology with an emphasis on global problems, the Arts, Communication (a course one sometimes encounters), and Health. That would leave out the important self-knowledge category though, for which there does not seem to be a natural disciplinary place. And it would leave out thinking, which could be distributed across the disciplines.

It is also interesting to ask what a curriculum might look like that included subject matters directly reflecting the list. Some of these subject matters could be considered content disciplines: Environment, Ethics, The Arts (integrated across several arts), Social Studies. We would also need more skill-like and developmental subject matters: Thinking, Self-knowledge, Communication and Collaboration, Empathy and Perspective Taking, Health.

One caution though: courses such as these might inappropriately segregate themes that are richest and most empowering when woven together.

To repeat a point, what stands out most from people's responses is the number of seemingly important themes that appear in typical curricula in minor ways or hardly at all. Questions such as these come to mind: Are these themes truly worthwhile? By what standards? How do these themes relate to instruction in the conventional disciplines? How can we give these themes a serious presence in education? Are schools the best setting for these themes? If not, where else might they be addressed, and how?